

BOOK REVIEWS

In Quest of Freedom

THE WILD GOOSE CHASE, by Rex Warner. Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.75.
POEMS, by Rex Warner. Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.

THE simultaneous publication of a novel and a volume of verse by Rex Warner introduces to American readers another writer who is associated with the Auden-Spender-Lewis group. That the remarkable work of the *New Country* and *New Signatures* contributors was not a flash in the pan, as some observers persistently rumor, is indicated not only by the superb quality of Auden's recent work (*Spain, Letters from Iceland*), but by the unusual ability of such less familiar figures as Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNiece, John Lehmann, and other writers whose work appears in the semi-annual collection, *New Writing*. These two books by Warner—and especially the novel—further illustrate the imaginative energy and versatility of the younger left-wing writers in England.

The Wild Goose Chase places once more in the foreground of discussion that strikingly unfortunate term, the "fable." Much of the talk which has revolved around the literary phenomenon which that term is intended to name has suffered from absence of extended definition, and it is devoutly to be hoped that the literary issues implicit in the brief comments which have already appeared in the *NEW MASSES* will soon receive fuller treatment. Meanwhile, it is appropriate to inform the reader that Warner is quoted by his publishers to have said that "The only modern novelist I like is Kafka. . . ."

This statement, I feel, is symptomatic of that exaggerated impression of Kafka's importance for contemporary fiction which Spender spread in England a few years ago and which has made the discussion of Kafka's genuine and original talent so awkward in this country. At the same time, this type of exaggeration calls attention to the important fact that not a few writers of undoubted talent regard the naturalistic method in fiction as oppressive (within the memory of this generation it was hailed as "emancipatory"). I suspect that some of these writers are confusing naturalism with its less gifted practitioners. There is, at any rate, a movement away from the restrictions of "photographic literalisms" of which Thomas Wolfe's announcement about the nature of his new novel (sections have appeared in the *NEW MASSES* literary section of January 11) is only the most recent instance. And this movement, which has complex sources in contemporary society as well as in literary tradition, requires evaluation. The increasing preoccu-

pation with the "myth" and the "legend," it is perhaps safe to predict, will lead in two general and opposite directions. For some writers anti-literalism will be the high road to a new literary mysticism; for others, one hopes, it will be an approach to an enriched realism. There will be a gathering compulsion in criticism to distinguish between the poetic penetration into reality which Mann is attempting in the Joseph cycle, for example, and the sickening retreat from reality exemplified by Cabell's dreary legend of Poictesme. Moreover, a disciplined exercise of critical language becomes imperative when Sinclair Lewis's "realism" degenerates into what is certainly a fable in the vulgar sense, and when Rex Warner's "allegory" turns into a searching commentary on capitalist society.

The Wild Goose Chase is obviously indebted to *The Castle* and *The Trial*. But what makes it so noteworthy is not its mechanical adaptation of Kafka's tortured inconclusiveness—indeed the novel suffers in those passages where such adaptation leads to a literalism of its own—but its assimilation of Kafka's fluid apperceptions to the native tradition of satirical political allegory in *Gulliver's Travels* and *Erewhon*. Warner escapes from the shut rooms and endless corridors to

the sunlight and the fields. He combines with Kafka's elaborate analysis of terror and frustration, Swift's animated narrative of adventure and wonder. Kafka could find for his Mr. K. no other escape from the weighty burden of his mysterious superiors than the oblivion of death. The climax of Warner's novel is the invigorating seizure of power from their oppressors by the workers and peasants. Swift, in *A Tale of a Tub*, objectified through allegory the historical force of the church's doctrinal deviations; Butler investigated the Victorian compromise in his land of Nowhere, in which the "colleges of Unreason" taught the "hypothetical language"; and Warner, in *The Wild Goose Chase*, gives in imaginatively symbolic terms the diagnosis and prescription for the pathology of fascism.

The precise meaning of the Wild Goose is never explicitly formulated in the novel, but it is apparent from the context that it symbolizes such virtues as freedom and courage and strength. It is certainly one of the failings of the novel that this symbol embodies a concept of individual emancipation which, as in Kafka, reduces itself to a mystical transaction between the individual and the universe. With its "mysterious barbaric love" the Wild Goose represents the never-quenched spirit of individual yearning for the ideal, which in Warner's poems, as in Lawrence's, is too frequently befuddled with the image of "the blood." This is not, however, the crucial point of the novel. It is the immediate road on which men must travel before they can even begin to feel as individuals that Warner has portrayed. And this is the road of social revolution.

The three brothers who set out on bicycles to discover the Wild Goose represent three generalized personalities. Rudolph is a sportsman and adventurer of the Kipling type, indifferent to ideas, spurred by love of action and fame. David, the bookish favorite of the local clergyman, is an aesthete, a scholar of ambiguous sex who despises the vulgarity of real existence. And George is a plain, honest, common-sense fellow; he is impatient with the social injustices which Rudolph covers up with self-confident bluff and David with metaphysical fumbling; his favorite authors, as he later tells his shocked inquisitioners, are Shakespeare, Karl Marx, Fielding in *Tom Jones*, and Isaiah.

On their journey to the "frontier" the brothers separate. George encounters a fantastic pedant who lives the life of a recluse tending two flowerbeds, of which one contains all the flowers mentioned in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* of Virgil, and the other all the posies that "in happier times" were culled by Elizabethan lovers. The intellectual debasement of the academic isolationist (Warner himself is a teacher of Latin and

Recently Recommended Books

- Red Star over China*, by Edgar Snow. Random. \$3. (Book Union Selection for January.)
America's Sixty Families, by Ferdinand Lundberg. Vanguard. \$3.75.
Two Wars and More to Come, by Herbert L. Matthews. Carrick & Evans. \$2.50.
Contemporary Mexican Artists, by Augustin Velasquez Chavez. Covici-Friede. \$2.75.
Marc Anthony, by Jack Lindsay. Dutton. \$3.75.
Letters from Iceland, by W. H. Auden and Louis MacNiece. Random. \$3.
Old Hell, by Emmett Gowen. Modern Age. Cloth, 85c. Paper, 25c.
Madame Curie, by Eve Curie. Translated by Vincent Sheean. Doubleday, Doran. \$3.50.
Six Centuries of Fine Prints, by Carl Zigrosser. Covici-Friede. \$5.
Young Henry of Navarre, by Heinrich Mann. Knopf. \$3.
The Pretender, by Lion Feuchtwanger. Viking. \$2.50.
The Flivver King, by Upton Sinclair. United Automobile Workers of America. Also by the author, Pasadena, Cal. 25c.
Ralph Fox: A Writer in Arms, edited by John Lehmann, T. A. Jackson, and C. Day Lewis. International. \$1.75.
Labor Agitator: The Story of Albert Parsons, by Alan Calmer. International. 35c.
The Civil War in the United States, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. International. \$2.50.
Engels on Capital, translated and edited by Leonard E. Mins. International. \$1.25.

Greek, and he must know the type) is portrayed with unforgettable irony.

Across the border George discovers a country which is the imaginative prototype of the imperialist and fascist state. Even before he gets to the Town he learns from the revolutionary leaders of the peasants the dangers that he, as a man with a conscience, will confront. He goes to the Town to see for himself. There he finds that David has already convinced himself through the logic of opportunism that the stuffed Goose on the steeple is the genuine article, and that Rudolph has developed the megalomania of an aviator for whom time and space have lost their meaning. In the Convent, where intellectual novices are compelled to undergo an operation initiating them into the dubious bliss of hermaphroditism, George learns that truth has become a type-written note from an invisible dictator.

In one of the most compelling passages of the book, George is selected by the powers that be to referee a football match. Somewhat bewildered when he is given the final score by the authorities before the game has even started, he determines to be fair, despite the possible sacrifice of his life. But the game takes place on a rubber field, and when, contrary to instructions, he hands the ball to the doomed team, the field begins to stretch out as the "wrong" team carries the ball to the goal. This parable of justice in a capitalist society is one of the most impressive I have read anywhere. It is equaled in this book only by the scene in which the military defenders of the Town invent one ingenious trick after another in a vain effort to defeat the revolutionists whom George had joined after his escape from the Convent. These passages, written in a superbly sensitive prose, are required reading for anybody who is interested in the experimental treatment of familiar themes in revolutionary fiction.

The characters are multiplied throughout the book, but they are always carefully differentiated: the priest, Reverend Hamlet, who poses as a friend of the peasant but who is in reality a spy for the oppressors; the renegade Alfred who, as Lenin said of Trotsky, mouths left phrases while making a bloc with the Right against the Left; the steadfast peasant Andria, who developed from a slave of the spoiled tyrant Koresipoulos to a loyal and courageous leader of the revolutionists; Freda Harrison, the leader of an earlier rebellion in which she had lost her life when the rulers, through a stratagem, turned workers against one another; and others too numerous to be mentioned.

Suspended though we are from realism in the ordinary sense, we cannot help feeling the reality of the conflict which ends in revolutionary victory. The poetic treatment of the situation does not rob the novel of the power to convince. And I for one feel that *The Wild Goose Chase* goes a long way toward achieving what Warner has elsewhere said he would like to see the novel do: "I should like to see the characters of the novel invested with



"It's a scorching denunciation of the Communist Party's shameful capitulation to the bourgeoisie. I've sold it to Hearst."

the kind of poetic quality that makes them, in their own way, more, not less, impressive than the characters of everyday life." At times, as in the love episodes involving George and Marqueta, he becomes absorbed in superfluous fantasy. His narrative device, as distinct from the narrative itself, is unnecessarily creaky. The flight of the wild geese over the final scene of celebration is an over-straining of symbolism. But the story as a whole is a welcome event in a literary season which has been so depressingly dull.

In his verse, Warner does not have either Auden's range or his impudent wit, but he does have that vital sense of confidence in life which so clearly separates the younger English poets from Eliot. Though he is primarily a poet of nature, he strives to avoid being what used to be called a nature-poet, a distinction which is implicit in the opening sonnet. Warner reflects "How sweet only to delight lambs and laugh by streams . . . to be a farmer's boy, to be far from battle." But he is bound to men closer than to birds:

How else should I live then but as a kind of fungus,
Or else as one in strict training for desperate war?

He continues to ransack nature for his imagery, and, with Hopkins, to follow the flight of birds in sprung rhythm—but with a difference:

For blight in the meadows, and for our master
builders
Let sickle be a staggerer and hammer heavy.

Warner's contempt for the stifling order of British imperialism is balanced by hope for

a future where men will no longer "fear the sack." That bright future still tends to represent for him, as for other middle-class poets in his group, an escape from the heritage of Harrow and Oxford. Between the "dying order" and the "new world" there is a difficult transition which can be effected only through the full acceptance of a working-class point of view. So far, Rex Warner has weathered the transition bravely.

SAMUEL SILLEN.

The Meaning of Meanings

THE TYRANNY OF WORDS, by Stuart Chase. Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$2.50.

ENTHUSIASTIC, superficial, well-timed, *The Tyranny of Words* is sure to have a wide and unhappy influence. For a period it will be impossible to make any general assertion in conversation without having your words jumped on as semantic "blabs." But the book is not harmful for what it says about words. Its advice in that regard could be—in fact usually has been—handed out in any composition course. Beware of emotional fetish-words. Regard as so much nonsense most high-sounding truths that cannot be verified, for which there can be no "operational" check. And don't yourself use abstract terms unless you have definite non-verbal "referents" for them, unless you are using them as a conscious shorthand for groups of dates, figures, facts, for the actions